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A FEW NEGLECTED PLATITUDES ON MODERN LANGUAGE EXAMINATIONS

After ages of school examinations, there is confusion as to their purpose, their scope, and the technique of constructing them. Examiners frequently vacillate between two distinct conceptions. We may call them the civil service and the army conceptions.

Suppose there is a vacancy in the position of purveyor to institutions for the insane, and the selection has to be made by civil service examination. There may be a thousand candidates for the job and 500 of them may be equally fit. We don't want 500 with a rating of a hundred per cent, for then we should have the original problem of selection still on our hands. We, therefore, make the examination as "hard" as possible. We put into it profound and tricky questions, and so manage to get the candidate's ratings strung out all the way from about 75 to zero. The eligible list now has a proper top and a bottom.

But suppose we want soldiers for the army. We cannot get too many, though those we do get must be fit. We now, with an eye to the work cut out for soldiers, arrange our tests so that no one incapable of standing the strain will pass, but we gladly accept all those who can.

The difference between the two types of examination is, that in the one we wish to fail as many as possible, while in the other we wish to pass as many as possible. A school examination is of the army sort. We want candidates for promotion, and there is no limit short of 100 per cent of the class to the number that may be accepted.

Examiners are not, of course, entirely unaware of the purpose, as above indicated, of school examinations. They do not, however, consistently adhere to it. Sometimes they are swayed by the notion of affording the brilliant boys an opportunity of showing their brilliancy, and of exposing the dullness of the dull ones. A prize competition may have such an aim but not a regular term examination. A term examination is merely a net with meshes large enough to let the little fishes fall back into the pool from which they were dipped. We are not concerned with the comparative sizes of those that remain in the net. They are all good for our purpose.

Another motive that sometimes vitiates the examiner's plan, is that of using the examination as a means of rating the teacher. It may be conceded that examination results—percentages of passing pupils—do, when properly interpreted, in a rough way, give an indication of the quality of teachers. It is, however obvious, that this end will be more accurately achieved in proportion as it is ignored. It is an unwieldy process to aim questions at the teacher through the pupils.

If the practical aim of the examination is to aid in the selection of pupils who are capable of benefiting by the instruction in the next higher grade, what shall be the technique of the examination? Aside from a few very general principles, the rules that may be of practical value are special to each subject. In what follows, I shall, therefore, confine myself to the subject of modern languages.

It is an elementary principle in all mental tests that there should be no difficulty or ambiguity about the questions and directions. Questions should not be put that require for their comprehension abilities of a different kind from those that are to be tested. Examiners sometimes seem to be engaged in an effort to outflank the pupil—their mode of approach is so extremely oblique. Here, for example, is a question from a recent Regents paper in third year German: "Die Verben ähneln, danken, folgen, gehorchen, gleichen regieren den Dativ. Bilden Sie Adjektive, die mit diesen Verben verwandt sind, und schreiben Sie deutsche Sätze, in denen diese Adjektive vorkommen." In formulating this question the examiner was plainly laboring under the ban (introduced from Germany a few years ago) against using the pupil's native language. But an examination in a foreign language is certainly not intended to test the pupils' ability to catch the examiner's drift when concealed in a complicated style of his own.

When an examination is set by the teacher who taught the class, there is seldom any difficulty on the score of subject-matter. The teacher knows what he has taught. When the examiner is not the teacher, we get the very common discrepancy between the examiner's idea of what the pupils ought to know and what they were actually taught. In the good old Latin and Greek days boys studied Caesar and Xenophon and there was never any doubt as to what they were expected to know. They were

expected to know the Commentaries and the Anabasis. Our modern language examinations do not test knowledge of a text, but of the unconfined language. Now it is well known that a language like French, German, or English is not one, but many. There is the language of the restaurant, of the schoolroom, of the shop, of the scientific world, of literature, of politics and of philosophy. One may be proficient in some of these, yet ignorant of others. Suppose that instead of giving candidates for a teacher's license in English a poem of Browning's to read and paraphrase, one gave them a page of Marshall's "Political Economy," or of Bradley's "Appearance and Reality"!

All this applies, of course, with much greater force to school-boys. Their vocabulary, their idioms, are artificially selected by the teacher. It is therefore unreasonable to expect them to be at home upon the limitless ocean of the whole language, or upon a sample taken at random from the whole language. The sample has to be taken from their artificial universe, that is, from the material drilled and made familiar by the teacher. The student early discovers that analogy is a treacherous, although an indispensable guide. He fears to rely upon it when he should; he is often betrayed when he does. His caution in hesitating to say what he has not himself heard is quite justifiable.

One of the most frequent sources of irritation in school examinations is the method of scoring. Do examiners assign ten credits to one question and two to another in accordance with some scientific scheme, or is their one guiding star the need of getting a total of a hundred? Why are some translations on Regents examinations rated 40 and others 20?

The first distinction we have to make—and it is one that all examiners do make roughly—is between frequent and rare language phenomena. Pupils use the personal pronouns many times a day, but very seldom use the subjunctive of "sterben." If a pupil shows ignorance of the personal pronouns he reveals much greater stupidity than if he showed unfamiliarity with the subjunctive of "sterben." The teacher who is inclined to regard examinations as a means of rewarding bright pupils with high marks will feel like attaching great value to the subjunctive of "sterben." But we should bear in mind the purpose of the test—to select those for promotion who can use the language they have

been taught—and that the relative frequency of the subjunctive of “sterben” to the personal pronouns, both in and out of school, is, say, as one to ten thousand.

The principle of relative frequency may be illustrated in another way. Suppose one wishes to test the range of the pupil’s vocabulary. For the sake of simplicity, and taking an extreme example, let us say we give ten words to be translated, and rate each correct answer, one. But the list contains seven rare nouns and verbs and three ordinary pronouns and prepositions. A boy might miss the seven and be rated thirty on the question, but obviously the rating would have no practical significance.

Another elementary principle frequently overlooked is the necessity of keeping the points for which one is testing distinct. If I wish to know whether a boy understands the use of the accusative case after a certain preposition, I should not give him a noun to use that he has never heard of. If I wish to determine whether he knows the use of the passive voice, I should give him one of the most common verbs to illustrate with, since I am not at that moment concerned with the range of his vocabulary.

Every examination in languages contains as the *pièce de résistance* a passage for translation, yet there is no uniformity in the methods of scoring this part of the examination. It frequently happens that teachers marking the same translation vary from one another by 20 per cent. in the credits assigned the passage. It has been proposed to use Thorndike’s “scale” device in rating translations. A scale of graded texts would be a long step in the right direction. But after you had your scale you would still be confronted with the tedious and uncertain process of marking deviations from the correct translation.

Why not face the fact that translation is an exercise in two languages, not in one? This double feat was much prized in the days of classical education, but in modern language teaching, emphasis has shifted. A passage assigned for translation may be regarded as a definite number of difficulties in vocabulary and idiom, and it may be scored on such a basis. The clause or phrase should be regarded as the unit, not the paragraph, and certainly not the line. A standard scale of texts would make impossible, what sometimes occurs, the setting of a passage for

translation in the third year that is easier than the one set for the second year.

Some teachers want questions that test "power" in an examination paper. "Power" in the handling of a foreign language means chiefly fluency—that is, speed. Anybody can formulate a sentence in any foreign language if given time enough. An eminent Egyptologist, if suddenly transported to a restaurant in the time of the Pharaohs, would be unable to order a breakfast before starving. Yet with ample leisure he succeeds in deciphering inscriptions on all the tombs and pyramids on the shores of the Nile.

Another form of power is ability to handle complex material without becoming confused and making mistakes. This would be shown in correctly using long sentences with interdependent clauses and phrases.

Now in actual conversation we have a time limit put upon everything we say. One must answer before one's interlocutor becomes impatient and goes away. Examinations nearly always have a time limit set, but this is intended only to save pupils and proctors from physical exhaustion. A scientific test of power or fluency, would be made with a stop-watch.

Everyone who has given any thought to the subject, is aware of the fact, that in the acquisition of a foreign language several rather distinct abilities come into play. At the base are, of course, auditory and visual perception. Then comes the so-called "brute retentiveness," the ability to remember and recall words; and not only single words, but words in combination, in idioms. And at the top is the power of abstract thinking, the ability to distinguish kinds of thoughts as such, between the statement that is a wish and one that is a condition, between a situation that has the accusative idea and one that has the dative idea. Without these powers of abstraction and reasoning by analogy, it is needless to say, the pupil will never become an adept in languages. To test these powers should be the function of examinations in the most advanced courses. Here is where the terminology of grammar may be freely employed.

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